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ABSTRACT

The report describes a 3-year project to identify and develop appropriate assessment tools for placing adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students into the appropriate proficiency levels according to California's state ESL standards for adult education programs. This involved reviewing 18 commercially available instruments to determine their suitability by matching content with the state standards, field testing five potentially promising instruments, surveying agencies across the state to determine current ESL placement practices, development of a framework for producing assessment models, and analysis and interpretation of testing results. Two of the five instruments previously field-tested were then recommended for use: the New York State Place Test (NYS) and Basic English Skills Test (BEST). In the third year, initial cutoff ranges for the two tests were established and a test development plan to guide production of operational placement instruments was created. The report focuses on the first of these two tasks. The method of field testing and data analysis are described for both tests, and results of field testing are presented separately. Results are discussed and recommendations for refinement are made. Contains 6 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Center for the Study of Evaluation

# California Department of Education

## Adult English-as-a-Second-Language Assessment Project

## Initial Cutoff Ranges for the BEST and NYS Place Test for Placement into Model Standards Proficiency Levels

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Adult English-as-a-Second-Language
Assessment Project

# Initial Cutoff Ranges for the BEST and NYS Place Test for Placement into Model Standards Proficiency Levels

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December 1995

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## Introduction

The work described in this report was completed under the auspices of the California Adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Assessment Project at the UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation, sponsored by the California Department of Education (CDE). The primary goal of this three-year project was to identify and develop appropriate assessment tools for placing adult ESL students into the appropriate proficiency levels according to the *English-as-a-Second-Language Model Standards for Adult Education Programs*[1] (California Department of Education, 1992).

The first year of project work involved reviewing 18 commercially available instruments to determine their suitability in terms of content match with the Model Standards. From the 18 reviewed, five potentially promising instruments were identified and field tested to determine the range of each instrument vis-à-vis the Model Standards proficiency levels and to reassess the content in light of student performance on the items. (See Butler, Weigle, & Sato, 1993, for a detailed report of Year 1 work.)

The second year of work included a survey of agencies across the state to document current ESL placement practices, the development of a framework for producing assessment models, and analysis and interpretation of the field testing results from Year 1. Based on these analyses, two of the five instruments field tested in Year 1 were recommended to the CDE for use in placing students into Model Standards proficiency levels: the New York State Place Test (NYS Place Test) and the Basic English Skills Test (BEST).[2] (See Kahn, Butler, Weigle, & Sato, 1994, for the results of the survey of placement procedures and Weigle, Kahn, Butler, & Sato, 1994, for a discussion of Year 2 work.)

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[1]Henceforth in this document, the *English-as-a-Second-Language Model Standards for Adult Education Programs* will be referred to as the Model Standards. There are seven proficiency levels designated in the Model Standards: beginning literacy, beginning low (BL), beginning high (BH), intermediate low (IL), intermediate high (IH), advanced low (AL), and advanced high (AH). The Adult ESL Assessment Project addresses placement only into levels beginning low through advanced high.

[2]Based on content review and field testing results from Year 1, the NYS Place Test was recommended for placing students into all six Model Standards proficiency levels while the BEST was recommended for beginning low through intermediate high only.

There were two primary tasks for the third year of work: The first involved establishing initial cutoff ranges for the NYS Place Test and the BEST. The second task involved the creation of a test development plan to guide the production of operational instruments for placing students into the proficiency levels defined by the Model Standards (see Kahn, Butler, Weigle, & Sato, 1995, for a description of the process). This report focuses on the first of these two tasks and is organized in the following way: First, the methods for field testing and data analysis are described for both tests together. Then the results of the field testing are presented separately for the NYS Place Test, the BEST Oral Interview Section, and the BEST Literacy Section. Finally, a discussion of the results is presented and recommendations for refining cutoff scores are made.

## Methods

In February 1995, the NYS Place Test, a 27-item oral interview, and the BEST, a 50-item oral interview and a literacy skills section containing 49 reading items and 19 writing items, were field tested at adult education agencies[3] across the state following training of test administrators from each agency. Tables 1 and 2 present the number of students by agency and proficiency level who participated in the field testing of the NYS Place Test and the BEST, respectively. As the tables show, the NYS Place Test was administered to about 10 students at each level from beginning low through advanced high at four agencies. The BEST was administered to approximately 15 students at each level from beginning low through intermediate high at three agencies. Note that slightly fewer people were administered the BEST Literacy Skills Section than the Oral Interview Section.

The agencies field testing the NYS Place Test and the BEST were well into the process of aligning their courses to the Model Standards, so it was presumed that the course level of the students was an accurate reflection of their language proficiency according to Model Standards levels. However, a preliminary analysis of the field testing data revealed a wide range of

[3]Henceforth in this document, adult education agency or agencies in California will be referred to as "agency" or "agencies."

Table 1
Number of students in field test administration of NYS Place Test by agency by proficiency level

| | Proficiency Level | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agency | BL | BH | IL | IH | AL | AH | Total |
| ABC | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 60 |
| Hayward | 10 | 11 | 10 | 12 | 10 | 10 | 63 |
| Santa Clara | 11 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 60 |
| Watsonville | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 60 |
| Total | 41 | 40 | 40 | 42 | 40 | 40 | 243 |

Table 2
Number of students in field test administration of BEST by agency by proficiency level

| | Proficiency Level | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agency | BL | BH | IL | IH | Total |
| LAUSD | 15 | 15 | 15 (14) | 15 | 60 (59) |
| Oxnard | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 60 |
| San Francisco | 15 (12) | 15 (14) | 15 | 16 (15) | 61 (56) |
| Total | 45 (42) | 45 (44) | 45 (44) | 46 ( 45) | 181 (175) |

Note: Numbers in parenthesis represent number of students taking the BEST Literacy if different from the number taking the BEST Oral Interview.

scores within each level indicating considerable variation in student language ability for the skills being measured by these tests. Because such a wide range of ability is not usually expected in a single level, follow-up information about student proficiency was collected in the form of teacher judgments of listening/speaking for the NYS Place Test, and both listening/speaking and reading/writing for the BEST. (See Appendix for an example of a teacher judgment form.) Since the teacher judgments were not collected at the same time that the testing took place, not all tested students received judgments from their teachers. Altogether, 225 or 93% of the students on the NYS Place Test received teacher judgments. Of the students taking the BEST, 154 or 85% received teacher judgments of listening/speaking, and 141 or 81% received teacher judgments of reading/writing.

For the NYS Place Test and both sections of the BEST, tentative cutoff points for each proficiency level were derived using procedures outlined in the BEST Test Manual (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1989, p. 57). Students were grouped by proficiency level according to current course enrollment.[4] The cumulative frequency distribution of scores for each level was calculated, and for each score, the level at which the cumulative frequency was closest to 50% (the median) was chosen as the most appropriate level for that score. In borderline cases, cutoffs were chosen to maximize the number of students placing into the same level as their current class level.

Table 3 shows a simple example of this procedure with invented data. As the table indicates, scores of 10 through 12 on this fictional instrument would place students into Level 1, since the cumulative percentage of scores is closest to 50 at Level 1 among the three levels. Similarly, scores of 13 and 14 would place students into Level 2, and scores of 15 or 16 would place students into Level 3.

Table 3
Example of cutoff score decisions*

| | Cumulative Percentage | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Score | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
| 10 | 35 | 25 | 10 |
| 11 | 40 | 30 | 20 |
| 12 | 50 | 35 | 25 |
| 13 | 60 | 45 | 35 |
| 14 | 65 | 55 | 40 |
| 15 | 75 | 70 | 50 |
| 16 | 80 | 75 | 60 |

*Example is based on invented data.

Once the tentative cutoffs were set, a crosstabulation was calculated of students by their current enrollment versus their enrollment based on the derived cutoffs. To control for any extreme differences in proficiency

[4]The same analysis was done using teacher judgment as the indicator of proficiency. The results were similar to the results reported here. For this reason, only the results using current course enrollment as the criterion are discussed in this report.

among students at the same level, students whose teacher judgment was two or more levels away from their current class enrollment were excluded from this analysis. The crosstabulation allows for a visual inspection of the number of students who would be placed higher or lower than their current class based on their test scores. Finally, percentages of students placing at, below, or above their current level based on the test in question were calculated as a way of summarizing the crosstabulation data succinctly. These analyses are presented in the Results section for each test below.

## Results

The results of the data analyses are presented for each test individually. Since the BEST Oral Interview Section and Literacy Skills Sections provide separate scores, these are discussed separately.

### NYS Place Test

Descriptive statistics for the NYS Place Test, presented in Table 4, show that the mean scores increase with each level, although the means for intermediate high and advanced low are quite close to each other. The table also reveals that the score ranges for each level are fairly wide at all levels past beginning low.

Table 4
NYS Place Test: Descriptive statistics by proficiency level

| Proficiency Level | n | Mean | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 41 | 4.88 | 3.88 | 0 - 17 |
| Beginning High | 40 | 12.33 | 7.56 | 2 - 28 |
| Intermediate Low | 40 | 23.88 | 8.99 | 6 - 47 |
| Intermediate High | 42 | 28.40 | 9.32 | 11 - 50 |
| Advanced Low | 40 | 29.50 | 7.55 | 9 - 45 |
| Advanced High | 40 | 35.38 | 7.55 | 9 - 45 |

Maximum number of points = 54

Table 5 shows the tentative score ranges for the six proficiency levels derived by the method described above. Table 6 shows the number of students at each class level who would have placed into the same proficiency level or a different proficiency level based on these cutoffs. As noted above, this analysis excludes students whose teacher judgment of their listening/speaking ability was two or more levels away from their current course level. The table shows that a large number of students at each level would have been placed one, two or in some cases even three levels away from their current level based on the tentative cutoffs.

Table 5
NYS Place Test: Tentative cutoffs

| Proficiency Level | Score Range |
|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 0 - 4 |
| Beginning High | 5 - 14 |
| Intermediate Low | 15 - 23 |
| Intermediate High | 24 - 29 |
| Advanced Low | 30 - 35 |
| Advanced High | 36 - 54 |

Table 6
Placement of students by current class level into proficiency levels according to NYS Place Test score*

| | Placement | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class Level | BL (0 - 4) | BH (5 - 14) | IL (15 - 23) | IH (24 - 29) | AL (30 - 35) | AH (36 - 54) | Total |
| BL | **25** | 15 | 1 | | | | 41 |
| BH | 5 | **20** | 10 | 4 | | | 39 |
| IL | | 4 | **16** | 11 | 3 | 5 | 39 |
| IH | | 3 | 11 | **9** | 10 | 9 | 42 |
| AL | | 1 | 7 | 11 | **12** | 7 | 38 |
| AH | | | 2 | 5 | 8 | **22** | 37 |
| Total | 30 | 43 | 47 | 40 | 33 | 43 | 236 |

*excluding cases where |level-tj| > = 2
Note: **Bold face** indicates the number of students placing into their current class level based on tentative cutoffs

Table 7 summarizes this information, showing the percentage of students placing below, at, or above their current class level. As the table shows, the tentative cutoffs are most accurate at the extreme ends of the proficiency scale and least accurate at intermediate high and advanced low, with only 21% and 32% of students, respectively, being placed into their current level by the NYS Place Test. These results highlight the preliminary nature of the derived cutoffs, an issue that will be taken up in more detail in the Discussion section below.

Table 7
Percentage of students placing below, at, or above class level based on tentative cutoffs for the NYS Place Test

| | Placement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Class Level | below level | at level | above level |
| Beginning Low | — | 83 | 17 |
| Beginning High | 13 | 51 | 36 |
| Intermediate Low | 10 | 41 | 49 |
| Intermediate High | 33 | 21 | 45 |
| Advanced Low | 50 | 32 | 18 |
| Advanced High | 1 | 59 | — |

## BEST Oral Interview Section

Descriptive statistics for the BEST Oral Interview Section are presented in Table 8. As the table shows, the mean score increases with each level, with the greatest increase between beginning low and beginning

Table 8
BEST Oral Interview: Descriptive statistics by proficiency level

| Proficiency Level | n | Mean | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 45 | 23.04 | 17.89 | 1-68 |
| Beginning High | 45 | 46.80 | 13.61 | 5-74 |
| Intermediate Low | 45 | 59.80 | 11.03 | 38-82 |
| Intermediate High | 46 | 63.87 | 11.42 | 31-77 |

Maximum number of points = 83

high. However, those two levels also show the greatest variance within levels, as indicated by the standard deviations and score ranges. As with the NYS Place Test, the wide variation in scores at all levels must be kept in mind when reviewing the preliminary cutoffs discussed below.

Table 9 presents the tentative score ranges derived as described above. The crosstabulation of students' current placements with their placements based on these score ranges is found in Table 10 and summarized by percentage of students placing at, below, or above their current level in Table 11. As the tables show, the score range for beginning low encompasses 80% of students currently placed at beginning low; however, at-level placement is less than 50% for beginning high and intermediate low and just under 60% for intermediate high.

Table 9
BEST Oral Interview: Tentative cutoffs

| Proficiency Level | Score Range |
|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 0 - 33 |
| Beginning High | 34 - 52 |
| Intermediate Low | 53 - 65 |
| Intermediate High | 66 - 83 |

Table 10
Placement of students by current class level into proficiency levels according to BEST Oral Interview score*

| Class Level | Placement | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | BL (0 - 33) | BH (34 - 52) | IL (53 - 65) | IH (66 - 83) | Total |
| Beginning Low | **32** | 6 | 2 | | 40 |
| Beginning High | 7 | **22** | 14 | 2 | 45 |
| Intermediate Low | | 11 | **20** | 14 | 45 |
| Intermediate High | 1 | 7 | 11 | **27** | 46 |
| Total | 40 | 46 | 47 | 43 | 176 |

*excluding cases where |level-tj| > = 2)
Note: **Bold face** indicates the number of students placing into their current class level based on tentative cutoffs

Table 11
Percentage of students placing below, at, or above class level based on tentative cutoffs for the BEST Oral Interview

| | Placement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Class Level | below level | at level | above level |
| Beginning Low | — | 80 | 20 |
| Beginning High | 16 | 49 | 35 |
| Intermediate Low | 24 | 44 | 31 |
| Intermediate High | 41 | 59 | — |

BEST Literacy Skills Section

Descriptive statistics for the BEST Literacy Skills Section are presented in Table 12. The table shows a large difference in means between beginning low and beginning high, with smaller differences between the other levels. Like the Oral Interview Section, the Literacy Skills Section scores vary considerably within levels, particularly at beginning low, casting doubt on the accuracy of any cutoffs scores derived from this data set.

Table 12
BEST Literacy: Descriptive statistics by proficiency level

| Proficiency Level | n | Mean | SD | Range |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 42 | 26.17 | 21.41 | 0-54 |
| Beginning High | 44 | 51.73 | 11.50 | 0-65 |
| Intermediate Low | 44 | 57.11 | 9.24 | 24-72 |
| Intermediate High | 45 | 63.67 | 6.34 | 46-72 |

Maximum number of points = 83

Table 13 presents the cutoff score ranges as determined by the method described above. The extreme variability and wide range of scores at beginning low makes the tentative cutoffs quite problematic: note that beginning low encompasses more than half of the total possible score range (maximum = 83), with much narrower ranges from beginning high through intermediate high. The effects of these narrow ranges can be seen in Tables 14 and 15, which show that only about one-third of students at

beginning high and intermediate low would be placed into their current levels based on these derived cutoffs. Thus the cutoffs for the BEST Literacy Skills Section based on this data set are problematic and should not be implemented without additional data.

Table 13
BEST Literacy: Tentative cutoffs

| Proficiency Level | Score Range |
|---|---|
| Beginning Low | 0 - 45 |
| Beginning High | 46 - 53 |
| Intermediate Low | 54 - 60 |
| Intermediate High | 61 - 83 |

Table 14
Placement of students by current class level into proficiency levels according to BEST Literacy score*

| | Placement | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class Level | BL (0 - 45) | BH (46 - 53) | IL (54 - 60) | IH (61 - 83) | Total |
| Beginning Low | **30** | 8 | | | 38 |
| Beginning High | 8 | **14** | 15 | 7 | 44 |
| Intermediate Low | 2 | 9 | **14** | 18 | 43 |
| Intermediate High | | 5 | 7 | **33** | 45 |
| Total | 40 | 36 | 36 | 58 | 170 |

*excluding cases where |level-tj| > = 2
Note: **Bold face** indicates the number of students placing into their current class level based on tentative cutoffs

Table 15
Percentage of students placing below, at, or above class level based on tentative cutoffs for the BEST Literacy

| | Placement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Class Level | below level | at level | above level |
| Beginning Low | — | 79 | 21 |
| Beginning High | 18 | 32 | 50 |
| Intermediate Low | 25 | 33 | 42 |
| Intermediate High | 27 | 73 | — |

## Discussion

In any situation where test scores are used to make decisions about individual students, whether it be placement, progress, or final achievement, the process of setting cutoff scores is an ongoing one that cannot be accomplished in a single field testing effort. The process involves a consideration of the test content and the characteristics of the students as well as the quantitative results of the field testing itself. Even when field testing provides enough information about the performance of students at various proficiency levels to be confident about cutoff scores, the cutoffs must be monitored closely in subsequent test administrations to ensure that the decisions made on the basis of the cutoffs are valid and appropriate.

The complexities of setting cutoff scores are increased when the test in question is to be used in conjunction with an instructional program that is still in the process of being implemented on a large scale, as was the case with the Model Standards in this field testing effort. The field testing data from both tests revealed a great deal of score variation within levels; however, it is unclear to what extent this variation is due to factors related to the field testing itself or to actual differences in proficiency among students placed into the same level within and across agencies. Because the Model Standards had only been in place at the participating agencies for a short time, and especially given that appropriate placement procedures for use with the Model Standards were still in the process of being identified and developed, it is quite likely that students at the levels tested were less homogeneous than would be desirable for setting accurate cutoffs. Indeed, the variability in performance within each level revealed by this study could provide useful diagnostic information for agencies seeking to compare their implementation of the Model Standards with other agencies.

Apart from the difficulties inherent in setting cutoffs for a program that has only recently been implemented, there are several other reasons for interpreting the field testing data and the derived cutoffs with caution. First, the number of students tested at each level per agency was small (10 to 15), so that the students tested may not be representative of the level. Second, students across agencies were placed into class levels through the use of a variety of instruments assessing different skills. This may help explain the wide range of scores within levels since the skills upon which

placement decisions were made may not have been the skills assessed in this field testing effort. Finally, because the field testing took place some weeks after the beginning of the school term, it is likely that students had increased their proficiency to varying degrees from the time placement decisions were made. Thus it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty that the tentative cutoffs presented in this report would place students appropriately into Model Standards levels.[5]

## Recommendations

The field testing effort in February 1995 was a useful first step in the process of determining appropriate cutoff scores for the NYS Place Test and the BEST for placing students into Model Standards levels. As the results in this report indicate, placement decisions based on the cutoff scores presented here are not likely to be reliable vis-à-vis Model Standards levels. For this reason, general dissemination of the initial cutoff ranges is not recommended at this time. Instead, further tryouts of the tests are suggested to help verify the cutoff ranges. An arrangement could be made to work with a small number of agencies for a one-year period to allow for close monitoring of the cutoff scores. To this end, agencies could be asked to volunteer to work with one of the two instruments and associated cutoff ranges as part of their placement process to help CDE make adjustments in the cutoff ranges as needed. Following this effort, CDE would be able to disseminate cutoff ranges to agencies statewide.

Once agencies begin using the tests on a large scale, a process should be put in place to continue monitoring the effectiveness of placement decisions based on the score ranges recommended for the NYS Place Test or the BEST. This can be accomplished by keeping records of students whose placements need to be changed once they are in the classroom or students and by monitoring the performance of students whose scores put them on the border between two levels. Such monitoring can reveal whether the cutoff scores at specific levels are set appropriately or need to be revised.

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[5]However, it should be noted that the published cutoff scores for the BEST (reference) suffer from similar problems, in that the data used to set the cutoff scores showed similar variability at the different levels of proficiency.

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## Appendix

## Example Teacher Judgment Form from February 1995 Field Testing

Name: _____ Level: _____

As part of the California ESL Assessment Project, we are attempting to establish preliminary cutoff scores for the BEST, which some of your students took in February, 1995. In order for us to be able to set accurate cutoff scores for the test, we would like some additional information about your students who took the test.

The attached table includes Model Standards descriptions of the listening/speaking abilities and reading/writing abilities of students at the six levels from Beginning Low through Advanced High. Please read the description for your level and answer the following questions.

1. Does the Listening/Speaking description in general fit **the majority** of the students in your class? _____

   If not, which Listening/Speaking description fits **the majority** of your students? _____

2. Does the Reading/Writing description in general fit **the majority** of the students in your class? _____

   If not, which Reading/Writing description fits **the majority** of your students? _____

3. Below you will see the names of the students in your class who took the BEST. In the space next to each name, please indicate whether the description for your level fits each student. If not, indicate the description that best fits the student and comment if appropriate.

| Name | Listening/Speaking | | Reading/Writing | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Fits (y/n) | If no, which fits best? | Fits (y/n) | If no, which fits best? |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
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| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Thank you for your help. We appreciate your time and effort!

## Model Standards Descriptions: Speaking/Listening

A student at this level:

| | |
|---|---|
| Beginning Low (BL) | Can comprehend isolated words and phrases.<br>Depends on gestures, a few English words, and primary language to communicate. |
| Beginning High (BH) | Can comprehend a range of high-frequency words used in context.<br>Communicates survival needs using learned phrases and sentences. |
| Intermediate Low (IL) | Can comprehend conversation containing some unfamiliar words in familiar contexts.<br>Can participate in basic conversations in routine social situations. |
| Intermediate High (IH) | Can comprehend conversations containing some unfamiliar vocabulary.<br>Can participate in face-to-face conversations on topics beyond survival needs. |
| Advanced Low (AL) | Can comprehend conversation on unfamiliar topics and essential points of discussion in speech on topics in special fields of interest.<br>Can participate in extended conversation on a variety of topics. |
| Advanced High (AH) | Can comprehend abstract topics in familiar contexts and descriptions and narrations of factual material.<br>Can participate in casual and extended conversation and in conversation on technical subjects with hesitancy.<br>Can discuss new and unfamiliar topics with hesitancy. |

## Model Standards Descriptions: Reading/Writing

A student at this level:

| | |
|---|---|
| Beginning Low (BL) | Can recognize letters and numbers.<br>May be able to write her/his name and address. |
| Beginning High (BH) | Can get limited meaning from print with successive rereading and checking.<br>Can copy words and phrases and write sentences based on previously learned materials. |
| Intermediate Low (IL) | Can read simplified material on familiar subjects.<br>Can write short messages and notes within the scope of her/his limited language experience. |
| Intermediate High (IH) | Can read materials on familiar subjects and authentic materials with limited success.<br>Can perform basic writing tasks in familiar contexts. |
| Advanced Low (AL) | Can read authentic materials on everyday subjects and technical material with difficulty.<br>Can produce routine correspondence and paragraphs about previously discussed topics. |
| Advanced High (AH) | Can read authentic materials on familiar subjects and nontechnical prose.<br>Can produce descriptions, essays, and summaries. |

Source: *English-as-a-second-language Model Standards for Adult Education Programs*, California Department of Education, 1992.